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ABSTRACT

In order to increase the knowledge base on the public policy issues pertaining to family homelessness, Columbia University and the Institute for Children & Poverty designed and implemented an extensive survey on the demographics of homeless families. Data on more than 140 variables were collected from 743 homeless heads-of-households in the spring of 1997. The parents who were interviewed resided in 14 emergency and transitional family shelters in New York City and northern New Jersey. This research shows that the typical homeless parent is a young unmarried mother with two or three young children, who grew up in poverty and typically experienced or witnessed domestic violence at some point in her life; never completed high school, often dropping out because of pregnancy, and she has at least one child suffering from a chronic health problem. Before becoming homeless, this typical mother lived with parents, a partner, or doubled up with someone else. Typically, this parent is unemployed and entirely dependent on public assistance. These findings illustrate the complexity of family homelessness, but the multiple issues surrounding homeless families must be individually examined and addressed before an effective response can be initiated. Policy makers and the public must take notice of the hundreds of thousands of homeless families, and then take effective strategies to break the cycle of poverty and homelessness. This regional snapshot is a first step toward avoiding future crises. (Contains 2 tables and 12 figures.) (SLD)

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ED 421 580

Homeless Families Today: Our Challenge Tomorrow.
A Regional Perspective

Institute for Children and Poverty
Homes for the Homeless

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Homeless Families Today: Our Challenge Tomorrow

A Regional Perspective

Family homelessness continues to be one of the most misunderstood and inadequately addressed public policy issues in America today. One reason is the scarcity of quantitative data available on the subject. In response, Columbia University's Graduate School of International & Public Affairs and the Institute for Children & Poverty designed and implemented an extensive survey on the demographics of homeless families in the New York City region. Data on more than 140 variables was collected from 743 homeless heads-of-household during the spring of 1997. The parents who were interviewed resided in fourteen emergency and transitional family shelters located throughout New York City and northern New Jersey. The following report summarizes the key elements of this research.

Today's typical homeless parent . . .

Table 1: A Profile of Homeless Parents

Characteristic		Characteristic	
Sex	%	Age	%
Female	89	≤ 18	4
Male	11	19 - 25	38
		26 - 30	18
Race / Ethnicity	%	≥ 31	40
African American	59		
Hispanic	32	Avg. age of children	8
White	3		
Other*	6	Number of Children	%
		0 - 1*	30
Marital Status	%	2	26
Never Married	60	3 - 4	27
Married	24	≥ 5	17
Other†	16		
		Employment Status	%
Education Level	%	Unemployed	91
< High School	59	Employed	9
High School Graduate	26		
> High School	15		

* Other includes Native American (1.7%) and Asian (1.3%).
† Other includes separated (8%), divorced (6%) and widowed (2%).
* Includes women who were pregnant at time of interview.
N = 743

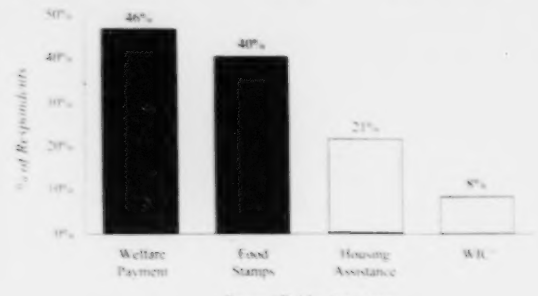
- *is a young unmarried mother with two or three young children, who grew up in poverty;*
- *experienced or witnessed domestic violence at some point in her life;*
- *never completed high school, often dropping out because of pregnancy;*
- *has at least one child suffering from a chronic health problem;*
- *lived with parents, with a partner, or doubled-up[1] prior to becoming homeless;*
- *left her last residence because of overcrowding, a disagreement or domestic violence;*
- *is unemployed due to a lack of child care, a lack of work skills or an inability to find a job; and*
- *is entirely dependent on public assistance to support herself and her family.*

. . . by all accounts, she represents a new American poverty.[2]

While these findings illustrate the complexity of family homelessness, the multiple issues surrounding this new poverty must be individually examined and addressed before an effective response can be initiated. A critical first step is collection of primary data. The most crucial steps, however, have yet to be taken: policy makers and the general public must first take notice of the hundreds of thousands of families across the nation who are homeless and then pursue effective strategies to break the cycle of poverty and homelessness.

UDC 82433

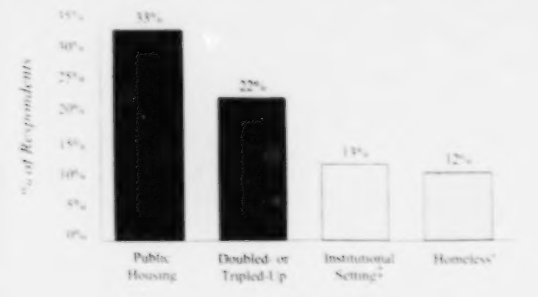
Figure 1: Homeless Parents' Public Assistance History as Children*



* Respondents could receive multiple types of public assistance; all percentages do not add to 100.
** Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children.
N = 716

The majority of homeless parents grew up in families that received public assistance, most commonly welfare and food stamps.

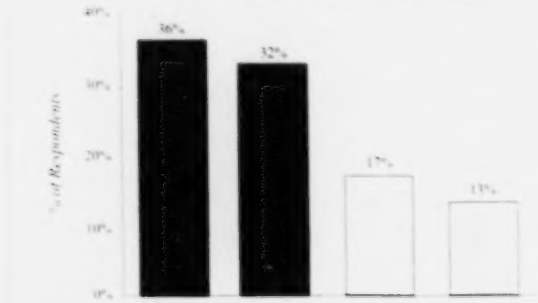
Figure 2: Homeless Parents' Residential Histories as Children*



* Respondents could give multiple responses; all percentages do not add to 100.
** Includes residence in foster care, a group home or other institutional setting.
*** Includes residence in homeless shelters, welfare hotels, abandoned buildings or on the street.
N = 722

Fifty-seven percent of homeless parents resided in potentially unstable living situations associated with poverty before their eighteenth birthday. More than ***one in five*** *lived doubled- or tripled-up and* ***twelve percent*** *even experienced homelessness as children.*

Figure 3: Homeless Parents: Types of Domestic Violence Experienced or Witnessed as Children or Adults*



* Respondents could give multiple answers; all percentages do not add to 100.
N = 741

Forty-five percent *of parents reported that they had experienced or witnessed family violence at some point in their lives. Of these parents,* ***more than half*** *(56%) were themselves the victims of physical violence, including assault with a weapon and sexual abuse.*

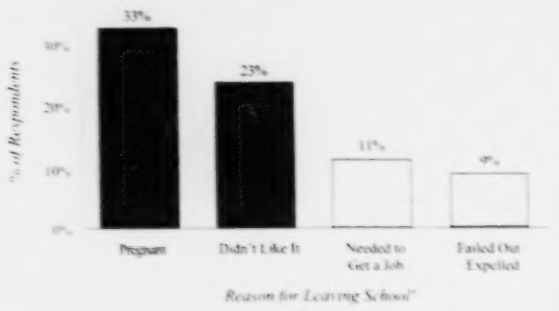
Childhood

The majority of parents who are homeless today lived in poverty as children: *more than half (53%) grew up in families that received some type of public assistance*—most frequently Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC, now TANF) and/or food stamps. (See Figure 1) Conversely, *almost half of homeless parents did not grow up on public aid, but in working, self-sufficient families.* These findings imply that while half of homeless parents are perpetuating a cycle of poverty, the other half have been "notched down" from more stable circumstances.[3]

The poverty today's parents experienced as children is also apparent in their residential histories. *Fifty-seven percent of parents resided in potentially unstable or tenuous living situations before their eighteenth birthday.* (See Figure 2) Forty-eight percent spent time in public housing and/or doubled-up living arrangements. *Thirteen percent had been institutionalized* within the foster care system, a group home or other institutional facility, and *twelve percent were even introduced to homelessness* as children, spending time in homeless shelters, welfare hotels, abandoned buildings or on the street.

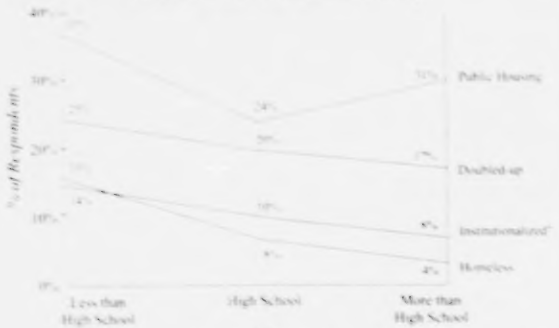
When asked about violence, *forty-five percent of parents reported that they had experienced or witnessed family violence* in their households as children or adults. However, such experiences appear to be under-reported here since in-depth studies on domestic violence among homeless families have found that at least eighty percent experienced family violence at some point in their lives.[4] Of those respondents who said that they had encountered family violence, sixty-six percent identified themselves as the victims. The most frequently reported forms of violence were emotional abuse and physical abuse; *thirty-six percent* reported witnessing or experiencing constant criticism, insults, humiliation or embarrassment, and *thirty-two percent* said they had been or had seen someone else in their household be slapped, hit, kicked or punched. (See Figure 3) In addition, many homeless parents experienced or witnessed an assault with a weapon (17%) or sexual abuse (13%) in their household.

Figure 4: Homeless Parents' Reasons for Dropping out of School*



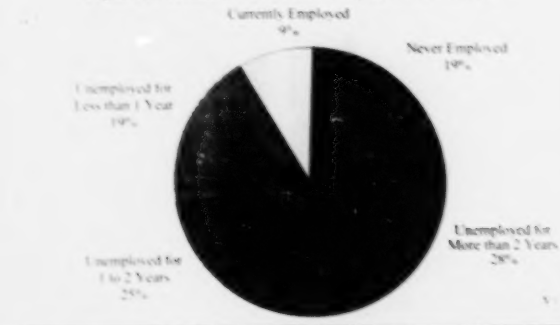
The majority of homeless parents (59%) have never graduated from high school or earned a GED. Parents most frequently cite a pregnancy (32%) or a dislike of school (23%) as their reason for dropping out.

Figure 5: Homeless Parents: Relationship between Level of Education and Residential History*



*Parents with less than a high school education are more likely than other homeless parents to have resided in precarious living situations as children. **Sixty-five percent** of non-high school graduates lived in at least one of these arrangements as children, compared to **forty-six percent** of those with at least a high school degree.*

Figure 6: Homeless Parents' Employment History


Currently Employed 9%
Never Employed 19%
Unemployed for Less than 1 Year 19%
Unemployed for More than 2 Years 28%
Unemployed for 1 to 2 Years 25%

*More than **nine out of ten** homeless parents are unemployed. **Twenty-six percent** have not held a job within the last two years and **one in five** (19%) have never worked.*

Education

Fifty-nine percent of homeless parents interviewed reported that they had never graduated from high school or earned a General Equivalency Diploma (GED). (See Table 1) For those who did not finish high school, the most common reason cited for having left school was a pregnancy (33%), followed by dislike of school (23%). (See Figure 4)

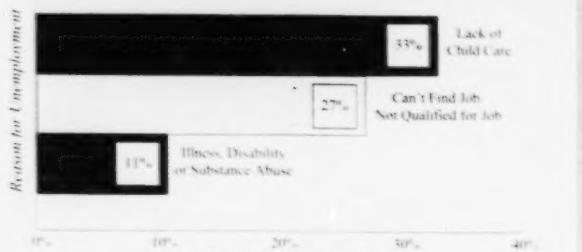
Respondents who did not finish high school were more likely than other homeless parents to have lived in public housing, doubled-up, in an institutional setting or to have been homeless before they were eighteen. (See Figure 5) Sixty-five percent of homeless parents who did not finish high school resided in at least one of the above living arrangements as children, compared to forty-six percent of those who had earned a high school diploma or GED. That is, *children residing in public housing, institutional settings or crowded living quarters were nearly one-and-a-half times more likely to drop out of high school.*

Employment

More than *nine out of ten homeless parents were unemployed* at the time of their interview. (See Table 1) While eighty percent of the unemployed heads-of-household had held a job sometime in the past, *the typical homeless parent had been unemployed for at least twelve months.* (See Figure 6) Not surprisingly, parents who had never finished high school were less likely to have work experience than those with diplomas. *Twenty-five percent of homeless parents who did not complete high school had never worked, compared to thirteen percent of those who did finish school.*

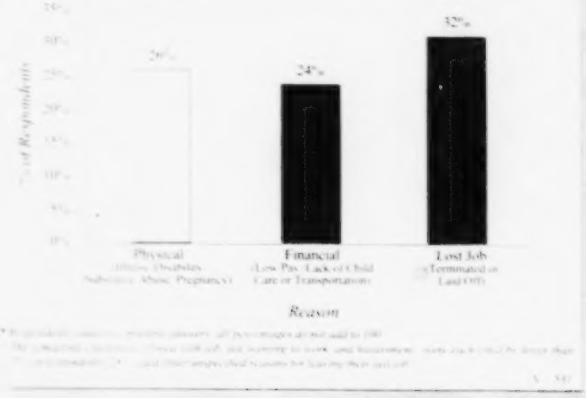
Lack of appropriate, affordable child care was cited by one in three (33%) homeless parents as the reason for their current unemployment. (See Figure 7) Additional analysis of the data also suggests that parents face a lack of steady jobs for which they are qualified and that pay a living wage. *More than one in four parents (28%) were unable to find jobs or were not qualified for the jobs for which they applied.* Among those who had previously

Figure 7: Homeless Parents' Reasons for Current Unemployment*



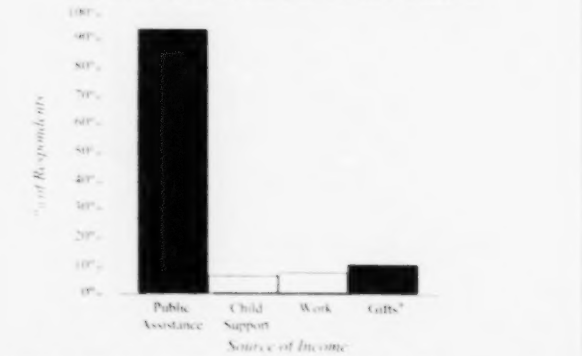
The reasons most frequently cited by homeless parents for not working are a lack of child care and an inability to find appropriate employment.

Figure 8: Homeless Parents' Reasons for Leaving Last Job*



*While multiple and widely varying factors contributed to homeless parents' departure from previous employment, **31% left their jobs because they were fired or laid off.** These job losses may imply that nearly one in three homeless parents lack the training necessary to handle job responsibilities, the ability to function in a work environment, or the qualifications required for long-term employment.*

Figure 9: Homeless Families' Sources of Income*



*The vast majority of homeless parents rely on public assistance – such as welfare, food stamps, and WIC – to support their families. **For three out of four, public assistance is the only source of income.***

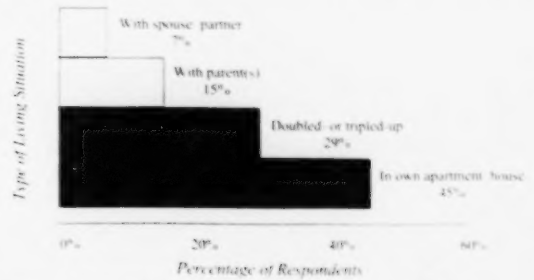
worked, one in four (25%) said they left their last job for financial reasons: the job did not pay enough, or they could not afford transportation or appropriate child care. (See Figure 8) Thirty-two percent lost their jobs because they were fired or laid off. This finding implies that nearly one in three homeless parents lack the training necessary to handle job responsibilities, the ability to function in a work environment, or the qualifications required for long-term employment. *Only two percent of unemployed heads-of-household said they did not want to work.*

Ninety-four percent of all homeless families receive public assistance. (See Figure 9) For seventy-five percent, welfare payments and other forms of public assistance are their *only* formal source of income. It is interesting to note that although all of the individuals interviewed had children and almost all were single women, *only six percent received child support payments.*

Housing

The typical homeless family has been residing in its current shelter for an average of six months. Of the eighty-two percent of homeless families who came to the shelter from permanent housing, *fewer than half (45%) came directly from their own apartment or house.* Twenty-nine percent had been living doubled- or tripled-up with friends or family members prior to entering the shelter system, while an additional twenty-two percent had been living with their parents, or a spouse or partner. (See Figure 10)

Figure 10: Homeless Families' Previous Living Situation*



Of those residents who came to their shelter from permanent housing, fewer than half came directly from their own apartment or house. Instead, the majority had been paying reduced or no rent by living with family, friends, or partners.

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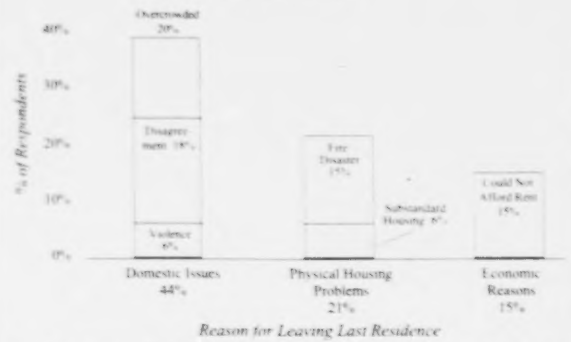
Domestic issues—overcrowding, disagreements or domestic violence—forced forty-three percent of respondents from their last residence. (See Figure 11) Although only six percent of the heads-of-household cited domestic violence as their primary reason for leaving, the response "disagreements" with the people they were living with may point to unrecognized or unreported instances of violence as well. Those who lived doubled-up, with their parents or with a spouse or partner reported such issues of crowded living quarters and household violence more frequently than did those who had their own home.

Twenty-one percent of homeless families left their last residence because it was substandard or had been destroyed by a fire or other disaster. Fifteen percent left because they could not afford the rent. Both of these explanations were much more frequent among those who came from their own apartment or house (thirty-eight percent because of physical problems; twenty-six percent for economic reasons) than among the general population.

Figure 11: Homeless Families' Reasons for Leaving Last Residence*

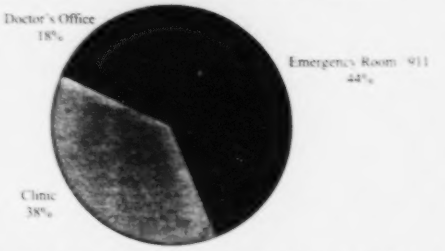


* Includes only those respondents who did not come to their current shelter directly from another shelter. 21% left their last residence for other unspecified reasons.

N = 300

Homeless parents most frequently cite domestic issues as the reason for leaving their last permanent housing. *Not surprisingly, such explanations are more frequent among those who previously lived with a partner or doubled- or tripled-up with other family or friends than among those who lived in their own homes.*

Figure 12: Where Homeless Families Seek Health Care*



* An additional 24 respondents (not represented in this chart) find medical help elsewhere or seek none at all.

N = 716

Many homeless families rely on costly emergency services for health care rather than seeking preventive services from a primary health care provider.

Family Health

The final area of investigation in this study found that homeless children suffer from a lack of consistent, preventive health care. Rather than visit a family physician, *forty-three percent of homeless parents reported taking their family to the Emergency Room or calling 911 for medical care.* (See Figure 12) This finding is particularly interesting in light of the fact that homeless children, whose intense poverty almost always qualifies them for Medicaid, are actually more likely to have health insurance than children in the general population. While thirteen percent of children nationwide are not covered by health insurance[5], only five percent of the homeless families surveyed had no children with health insurance.

Despite this greater rate of health coverage, homeless children are much more likely to suffer from respiratory ailments than children generally. (See Table 2) *Forty-two percent of the homeless parents interviewed had at least one child with asthma or other respiratory problems,* a rate that is at least twice the national average. Worse yet, *fifty-four percent* of homeless children suffer from some chronic health condition.

Table 2: Health Problems Among Homeless Children vs. Children Nationally*

Type of Illness	Percent of Homeless Children	Percent of Children Nationally
Asthma/ Respiratory	42.4	18.49
Ulcers/ Gastrointestinal	3.3	1.10
Epilepsy	3.2	0.47
Physical Disability	3.2	5.67
Diabetes	1.4	0.14
Tuberculosis	1.0	0.01

While not all ailments commonly associated with poverty occur more frequently among children in homeless families than among children in the general population, one difference stands out: ***homeless children are more than twice as likely to suffer from asthma or other respiratory problems as other children.***

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The Future

The portrait that emerges here is a somber snapshot of the over 600,000 families living doubled-up or in homeless shelters across the United States today.[7] It highlights the tremendous obstacles that impede America's poorest families who are dependent on public support for day to day survival in their move toward employment and stability.

This is not simply a status report on homeless families today, but also a barometer of the storm of homelessness likely to sweep the country tomorrow. This portrait is a warning call to those charged with reforming welfare policies: after early successes in moving welfare recipients to work, their task will grow far more difficult and their stories of success far more rare. In fact, while these numbers represent families who are homeless today, they also represent the hundreds of thousands of families likely to be homeless tomorrow if the public safety net unravels too far.

This regional snapshot, while critical to envisioning the challenge that lies ahead, is only the first step in avoiding future crisis. Research on the face of family homelessness in regions from across the country must follow. The need for universities, research institutes and service providers to work together to gather such information has never been greater. Through such initiatives we can understand the depth of the problem of family poverty and homelessness and finally achieve effective solutions.

Notes

1. Doubled-up is here defined as residence in an apartment or house shared with friends or family members, often in overcrowded quarters.

2. The "new poverty" refers to the descent of families into a poverty deeper than any seen prior to the 1980s homelessness. For in-depth discussion, see R. Nunez, *The New Poverty: Homeless Families in America* (New York: Insight Books/Plenum Publishing, 1996).

3. The "notched down" generation refers to children of the working poor who were notched down into welfare dependence and homelessness by changes in the economy during the 1980s. For in-depth discussion, see R. Nunez, "Family Values Among Homeless Families," *Journal of the American Public Welfare Association* 53 (1995).

4. I.L. Bassuk, L.F. Weinreb, J.C. Buckner, A. Browne, A. Salomon and S.S. Bassuk, "The Characteristics and Needs of Sheltered Homeless and Low-Income Housed Mothers," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 276 (1996); Homes for the Homeless, *Day to Day... Parent to Child: The Future of Violence Among Homeless Children in America* (New York: Institute for Children and Poverty, 1998).

5. Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Kids Count Data Book: State Profiles of Child Well-Being, 1996* (Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1996), p. 20.

6. Numbers provided for homeless children represent the number of parents surveyed who had children with each illness (N=693). Numbers for the general population calculated from Centers for Disease Control, *Reported Tuberculosis in the United States, 1996* (Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control, 1996); National Center for Health Statistics, *Current Estimates from the National Health Interview Survey, 1994* (Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 1995).

7. Institute for Children and Poverty, 1996; U.S. Conference of Mayors, *A Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness in America Cities: 1996* (Washington DC: U.S. Conference of Mayors, 1996).

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